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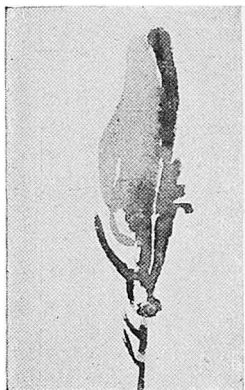
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STRAIGHTFORWARDNESS VERSUS MYSTICISM

BY EDWARD KING

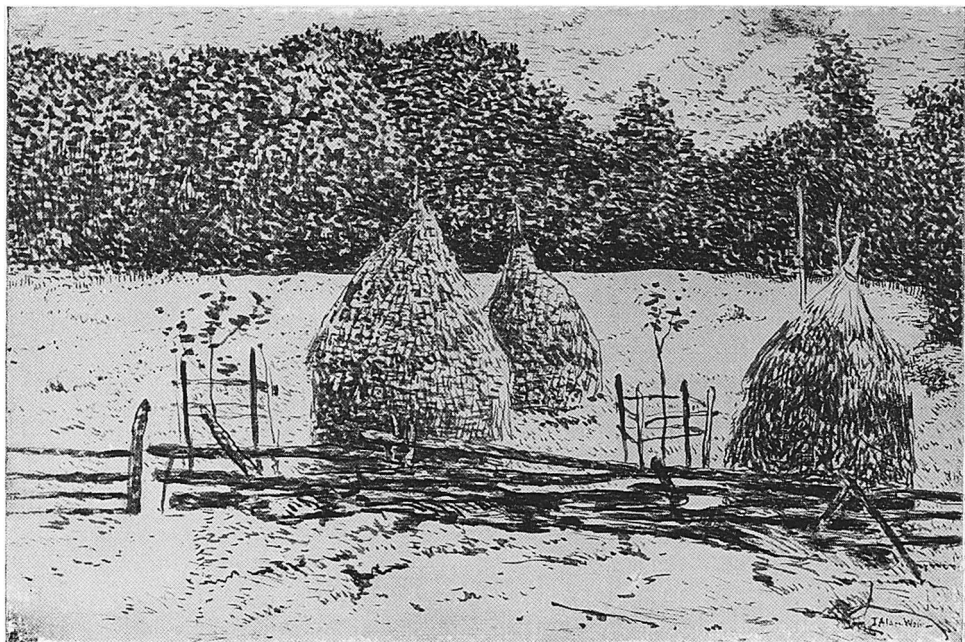
With original illustrations by John Alden Weir.

ONE of the distinguishing features of this spring's art exhibitions in Europe, we are told, was the absence of mysticism. Gone is the Sar Peladan and all his uncanny crew; and the large tranquil transcripts of nature and humanity resume their lead. Was it the onslaught of Max Nordau which frightened these *poseurs* into the darkness where they belong? Who shall say? They were so vain that they might have thought it fine to be pointed at as types of "degeneration." They were faddists and could not have a lengthy existence. And now perhaps we may be allowed hereafter to judge for ourselves what a painting signifies, without having a dozen bizarre, celestial and infernal meanings attributed to it by the followers of the fad. Sincerity and simplicity take up their guidance once more. Happy he who profits by them.



A FEATHER

Absolute faithfulness in copying nature as one sees it need not prevent the copy from having an atmosphere of its own—a distinctive style which will carry the painter's individuality safely down to posterity. The mystics, the symbolists, the allegorists, as often as not have missed the note of style, and have become commonplace. Then to conceal the real *banalité* underlying their grotesque conceptions they have invented a jargon, made of quaint mystical terms; and have imagined strange and wonderful stories to tell in it about what they really do mean.



HAY-STACKS.

But our true and faithful student of nature and men generally manages to acquire an original way of treating his subjects. Seen through the temperament of J. Alden Weir, for example, a rather prosaic New England pasture suddenly takes an interesting—I had almost said a romantic—look. The rugged outlines of the low hills are softened, the whimsically built rail-fences, which often deface poetical landscapes, are called into the service of poetry; the rocks in the foreground, mottled and ancient, seamed and cracked, irregular in their march as if they had wilfully resolved that they would not serve the purpose of the artist—are brought in without extenuation; but they serve the general purpose of harmony. These unpromising and hard features are all mellowed in the rich warm light of the artist's fancy, until they seem enchanted.

A "school in art" is always a dangerous experiment, because, if the artist who values truth tries to stick to its tenets they cripple him; they attack and endanger his individuality. It is really his own thought which he is painting when he sits down to copy a rail-fence or an aisle of forest trees. If he tries to paint the thought or the impression of another about the same things, he will make a signal failure. Certain masters in art are like those teachers of singing who demand, when you are about to begin your training under them, that you should renounce all faith in what little you may have learned elsewhere. They confuse the student's powers, and inflict permanent injury upon them.

In Mr. Weir's work there is not only the charm of a puissant individuality, but his simple, almost primitive treatment, is very forcible. A look across a farm—and straightway he has a picture—none the less one of interest because he has resolutely declined to choose the conventionally picturesque. He glorifies nature by his fidelity in serving her, and by the communication of his own mystic enthusiasm. The merest sketch from his hand has the inexpressible quality which marks the sympathetic interpreter. A field with a dense mass of trees behind it; in the foreground a few haystacks; bits of trees surrounded by starveling fences;—here is not much material, you say, for a good picture. Yet Mr. Weir makes it not only attractive, but instructive. He draws out the heart of things by reason of his careful study. Nature is often sullen and morose—sometimes entirely forbidding—for the insincere or careless student. To Corot, because he loved her well, and devoted his life so chivalrously to her, she manifested a wondrous tenderness: her smiles were radiant: her ineffable beauty was never masked by a frown. She



HER FIRST LETTER

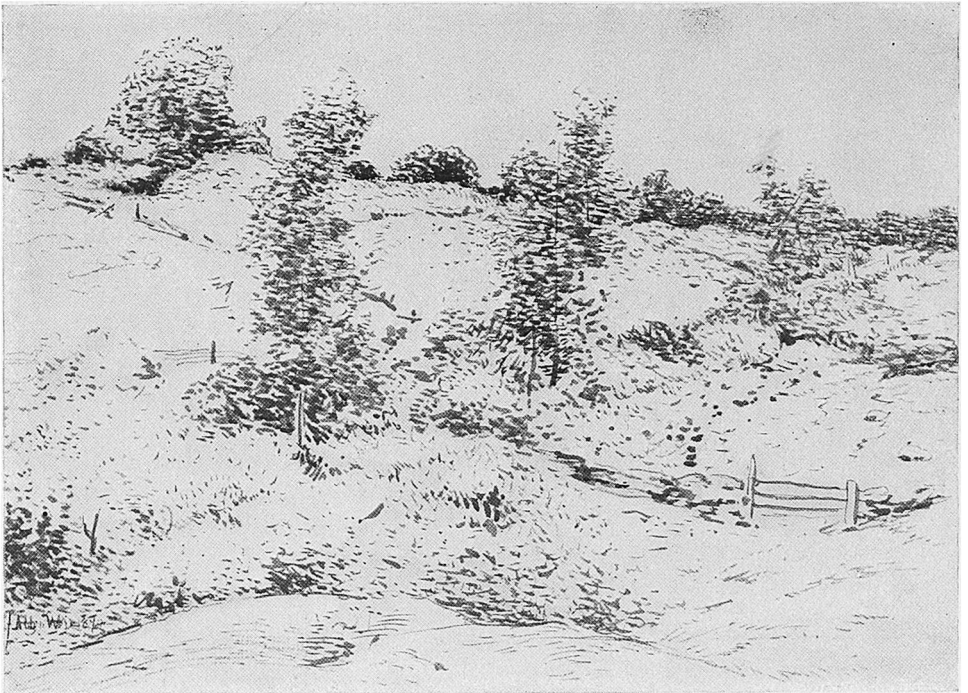
opened to him the charming mysteries of her being, because he had eyes to see and ears to hear. For him she threw aside her veil: she dazzled him with her full loveliness.

Learning how to look at his subject is the work of a lifetime for an artist. His life passes in pleasurable struggle, and just as he finds his vision clear and strives to reproduce what he sees with complete clearness, fate draws his career to a close. But at various points on his way even his partial successes are sufficient to give him lasting fame. And he can afford to wait, for he finds compensations in the gradual unfolding of nature's heart.

I have just been reading Pierre Loti's "Jerusalem," and it seems to me that the author's method furnishes a case in point. Here the noted academician has the grandest subject ever presented to him; yet he keeps untainted his plain sincerity; he depicts things as he sees them—not as he would like them to be. He does not revel in mysticism; he refrains from "composing" one vast picture of the holy city and the sacred scenes; but the



OUT FOR A WALK



A SPRING LANDSCAPE

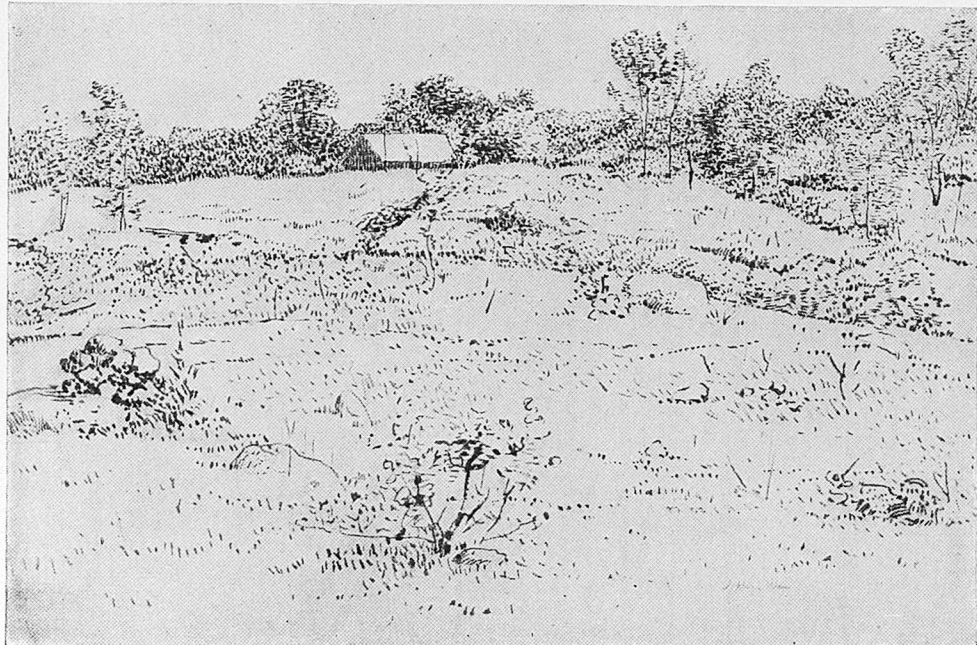
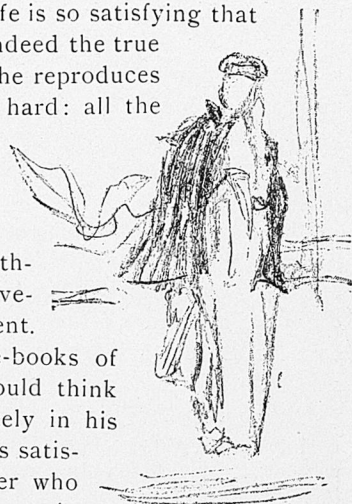
cumulative effect of his numerous sketches from life is so satisfying that one closes the volume with the feeling that this is indeed the true Jerusalem. Nor does the earnestness with which he reproduces things as they are make an effect which is literal or hard: all the sketches are bathed in the glow of a fine imagination. Not every literary traveler can do this,

even when he adopts the good method. Genius without method moves in wavering lines: method without genius is so heavy that its movements are always slow and infrequent.

What Loti does in his note-books of travel—unique in literature, I should think—is to make us participate absolutely in his impressions, and to receive them as satisfactory and inspiring. The painter who

can persuade us to accept the manner in which he has seen a certain landscape, or a fugitive aspect of nature, achieves a fine triumph born of the spontaneity of his own impression. We bow before his rendering because we recognize that he has not tried to improve upon nature; because he understands that she makes her own harmonies. Lamartine was constantly “composing” word-pictures when he made his famous

“Journey through the Orient;” he would not receive things in the divinely capricious and wayward beauty of real nature, he insisted on arranging and draping them to suit his fancy. Hence Loti’s pictures are immeasurably superior to his.



A LOOK ACROSS THE FIELDS